

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Biopolitics and Vulnerable Populations in Contemporary Literature

So, this is our lesson on biopolitics and vulnerable populations in contemporary literature as we continue our exploration of biopolitics and its links with vulnerability and we have done some accounts of the historical rise of biopolitics from the 18th century when you look at various aspects of how say vagrants or quote unquote “deviants” have been confined, incarcerated and kept monitored and under surveillance but this one focuses on contemporary literature. So just to reiterate the points, the definition biopolitics is the control, the management and in extreme cases extermination of entire populations. If you recall some of the earlier lessons we did speak about the concentration camps, the extermination camps and even the refugee camps where large sections of the population based on their ethnic origins or religious identity or racial identity have been incarcerated, put to hard labor and in most extreme forms exterminated as well. So, if biopolitics is the control, the management and extermination of populations, the biopolitics plays out in terms of disposable bodies as in bodies that are disposable, reproductive biocapitalism and the collective or communitarian precarity of entire groups. In contemporary novels, the value of life or death of individuals and communities is the hallmark of the biopolitical theme.

This has four related connected themes. One, death is not measured in the same way for different people. Two, people are classified and treated as disposable by either the state or corporate bodies. Three, apparatuses such as medicine or public health that have been designed to take care of vulnerable bodies often function in ways that place different values on the bodies. So not all bodies have the same value in the eyes of the public health apparatus. And you will recall we did speak about this when we were addressing the pandemic where we said the denial of say medical services or assistance to the elderly during the pandemic was built upon the assumption that they had less value as living beings. Finally, fourth point, the management of bodies, their functions and their reproduction becomes the concern of the states and the concern very often of corporate managed business. All these four, death being not measured in the same way where people are classified and treated as disposable by corporate organizations or the state and apparatuses such as biomedicine or public health that were actually designed to take care

of vulnerable bodies function in such a way as to place different values on the bodies. And finally, the management of bodies, their functions and their reproduction becomes, in these novels, a subject for the state or corporate control.

So let's take them one by one. Disposable bodies and corporate bodies. And you have two excerpts, one from Indra Sinha's novel *Animals People* which some of you might know is a novel based on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy and the explosion of poisonous toxic gas which not only killed thousands, it also maimed people for generations to come. The second one is from Ambikasudhan Mangad's novel *Swarga* which is about the Endosulfan Tragedy in Kerala. Now if you take a look at the Indra Sinha excerpt, the excerpt shows that everybody gets their share of the company's poison.

The company is the novel's term for Union Carbide the company. But of all the company's victims says the novel, we are the youngest. The unborn paid the highest price. Why? Because even before, birth in the form of fetuses, embryos, the next and next generation of people in Bhopal had imbibed the toxin. For many therefore Bhopal is an intergenerational tragedy that the toxins imbibed by one generation entered into the system and that toxin was transmitted to the next generation.

So the next generation as it says, "Never mind dying, they never even got a fucking shot at light". That's the complaint. Even before they were born, they were doomed. The second excerpt from Ambikasudhan Mangad's *Swarga*, the endosulfan novel, the clear indictment is of the state. So, Indra Sinha's novel speaks about the company, Union Carbide Corporation, company, corporate body, which by its negligence, by its neglect, toxified the place, the people for generations to come.

Mangad's novel is about the state. It's about this terrible violence that the governments inflicted, the terror that it has perpetrated. They set up these monoculture plantations, destroying priceless biodiverse forests and not in a negligible area. So, the argument being made here, the argument being forwarded here is that the state was responsible for not only deforestation, but what it actually produced. So, the toxin from Union Carbide is inside the bodies of the unborn, of even the unborn in Sinha's novel.

And some of you may remember the pictures of fetuses in glass bottles, photographs taken after Bhopal of the Bhopal tragedy. The fetuses, it's a very disturbing picture. The fetuses were all already toxified. They had already assimilated, ingested the poisons because they were in the wombs of the mothers who had been exposed to the gas. So, the toxin from Union Carbide is inside the bodies of the unborn in Sinha's novel.

And the quest for justice, the various activist organizations, advocacy campaigns is

thwarted because the biopolitical regime, and the biopolitical regime is the alignment of the state with corporate interests, refuses to acknowledge the exact nature of the toxins. It also refuses to acknowledge that the toxins have been passed on from one generation to the next so that it is intergenerational, which means to say that the biopolitical regime is not looking at only the present generation of victims. It is denying that there were future victims as well. It also denied, rejected, sharing the knowledge of what the toxins actually were, as in the chemical constituents. So, the biopolitical regime refuses to acknowledge the exact chemical nature of the toxins.

And it also refuses to accept the intergenerational nature of the tragedy. As a result, many generations are condemned to a future of toxified bodies. And like I said, the biopolitics here is the alignment of the state with a corporate body, that the state is keener on protecting the interests of the company rather than the people it is supposed to serve. And this is the tragedy of Bhopal. So, the vulnerable poor are rendered doubly vulnerable because of this biopolitics.

And three related arguments can be made that the material toxins in the bodies in either the Bhopal case or the Endosulfan case render them vulnerable. They are disposable people and the corporate bodies such as Union Carbide seem to have greater resilience, greater protection from the state than the people. That means the state is keener on protecting the interests of large corporate companies rather than the people who are victims of whatever has happened, whatever disaster has happened, whatever toxins have been sent out into the air or into the waters. So, this means effectively the people have been rendered disposable. Their lives really don't matter.

So that was theme one. Theme two is on reproductive biopolitics. And you can see here an excerpt from Margaret Atwood's now classic work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. And the tale set sometime into the future where women, fertile women to be very accurate, fertile women have been kept for the explicit purpose of reproduction, where they are meant to be just wombs. And that where the men, commanders and others who are in power, who have the legitimate authority to do so will impregnate them so that the human race can continue.

And here is an account, a little excerpt from the novel itself, where the woman who has been designed as and constructed as a handmaid is describing herself. "I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure or a means of transportation or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless life, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I am a cloud congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and

more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black, red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a boom, gigantic, round, heavy and on. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty again, again, I listen to my heart wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time”.

Powerful. It's a description of how the handmaid feels and the changing perception she has of her own body, where the woman's body has been now confined to, limited to one purpose alone. That's why it opens with the argument, with the position that the body was meant at one point to give her pleasure, that it was a body she owned. But as the reproductive politics of the novel of the city in which it is set in Gilead proceeds, the handmaids discover that they don't own their bodies and their bodies are not meant to provide pleasure. They're not meant to be theirs. The bodies are owned by the state and the purpose of the body is exclusively to reproduce, to carry on the legacy of humanity. So women's bodies in the biopolitics of the Handmaid's Tale are as Jasanoff says, “manipulated biological entities”. The woman is enslaved. Her body is an apparatus for reproduction as determined by the government.

The woman is never treated as a whole unit. She is not a complete person. She is just her reproductive mechanisms, her reproductive organs. So, the body has actually been segmented. It has been rendered vulnerable because the body is not hers to begin with. It's owned by the state and moreover, it's not treated as a body in its entirety. It's reduced to one function. It's a certain kind of biologism where the only function, the only valuable valued function is reproduction and there is nothing else really that constitutes or is seen as a woman's body. So, this is how the politics plays out and as you know when the novel moves on, the women, the handmaids are also controlled. They are the common property of the society. They are managed and manipulated by a senior generation of women and the entire structure of that particular society has only one reproduction and there the woman is at the center. Now that was theme two.

We now move on to collective precarity and bio-capitalism and this is an excerpt from Prayaag Akbar's novel *Laila*, which is again a dystopian text and sets on where in the future and it looks at communalization, the antipathy and antagonism towards minorities and the intentional deliberate rendering vulnerable of people, of entire populations being marked for treatment of a certain kind and here is a set of excerpts and it points very clearly to systems of exclusion, systems of segregation, how people who eat meat are one category, people who eat only fish are one category, people who drink alcohol or eat pork are one category and as the first little excerpt on your screen shows, once the community had control, its society revived laws written by colony builders a hundred years ago

ensuring that land could not be sold to those who did not belong and if you recall we have already addressed the fact that for example, contemporary cancel culture, there are modes of exclusion and inclusion. There is mockery but there's out or in extreme cases outright oppression and exclusionary tactics by which people are thrown out of the social order are slowly or sometimes violently expelled from the social order and Prayag Akbar's novel actually is talking about it. In the second excerpt, Akbar is talking about how the society has been segmented and even the property sales columns have become, are contingent upon and are constructed in terms of caste or specific community-based listings.

“Real estate listings”, says Prayaag Akbar became like matrimonials “Brahmin only, Yadav's only, Thakur's only, Parsi's only”, and “soon the city was in segments Tamil Brahmin sector, Catholic commons, Maithili acres, Brahman heights” etc etc. What is Akbar doing? Akbar is representing, Akbar is showing how the city has been segmented and people segregated which means to say that your ownership and purchase of property depends on the identity that you were born into. You were this community or that community you belong to this religion or that religion you spoke this language you ate this kind of food you followed you followed these cultural practices as opposed to something else and even property which is of course a very commercial enterprise and is a profit-making enterprise is now based on ethnic religious and other identities. So, the control of spaces in terms of renting or purchase is founded on discourses of purity “they are like us”, “they are not like us”, “we are pure, this community, they are not”, “that's a different community” so we start talking in terms of otherhood we speak of secondary citizens we speak of other people and marriages liaisons social relations even property purchases are designed to safeguard these quote-unquote “pure” racial, ethnic or caste based identities. So the purpose is to make sure that those boundaries are clearly marked that nobody crosses that particular boundary and that's important because that's where the purity discourse comes into operation and Prayaag Akbar will build on this when he states later in the novel “the perfect city” and what is the kind of perfection here? “A place of order discipline clean pure those who do not obey our rules must feel the strength of our history”.

So order here that is the social order here is founded on is based on marking genetic linguistic religious ethnic and other borders and that has to be defended which means the discourse of purity cleanliness and order reiterates caste or race-based discrimination and control of bodies and in the process makes some people vulnerable ensures that some people are rendered vulnerable they have been excluded they have been marginalized and they have been targeted so Prayaag Akbar's *Laila* actually speaks about entire populations being set apart segmented and they are constantly at war because each is

trying to defend their quote-unquote “pure” ethnic identity, “pure” a linguistic identity “pure” religious identity right.

Our next example in terms of collective vulnerability and the discourse of purity comes from Chen Quifan's novel *Waste Tide* which is a novel about globalization and electronic waste and it is set somewhere in China and the city a large territory called Silicon Isle and here is an excerpt from it and it talks about how the regulation of drug trials clinical trials within the United States have been shifted to developing nations so that they are able to circumvent the regulations on clinical trials. And there is more corruption here they are mismanaged and the trial subjects are available for a very small amount and their bodies are made available for people to experiment on their bodies are cheap labor they are raw material and their raw material in ways that would be unacceptable in, say, the United States or the first world or the global north so *Waste Tide* actually speaks about how globalization operates and how it operates on principles that eventually lead to discrimination against particular community. So as the novel proceeds we see that the electronic waste from all parts of the world finally come and get dumped in Silicon Isle in that place people live within waste and what's important is they are themselves called “waste people” the economy of Silicon Isle relies upon waste and the people themselves live embedded in that waste and they're called “waste people”. They are disposable so they are available for clinical trials for drug trials because their bodies are cheap there is no regulation there's no ethical practice of how you deal with such people you just assume that they are available and you treat them experiment on them make them into guinea pigs and no questions are asked. So as opposed to say the United States where these trials will be subject to rigorous scrutiny rigorous ethical and legal scrutiny you shift the location of your trials to the third world, where because the people are poor because the people are desperate and hungry they are willing to subject themselves to strange experiments which may go wrong which may damage them no compensation needs to be offered it's completely the market of the experimenter of the drug company. Then there is also the creation of electronic drugs in this particular novel *Waste Tide* where what is called digital mushrooms are things that people are addicted to it gives them a kind of entertainment system, it's something that they get addicted to, it helps them forget their lives etc etc and of course, over a period of time those who are addicted to it are unable to function they are loose they lose the ability to work. In the last excerpt which you can see on your screen the passage which begins “the crushed plastic” the process is being explained, “the crushed plastic would then be melted down cooled form etc. and people everywhere could benefit from the affordable “Made in China” merchandise” the trash is converted into something valuable. The local people who live in that waste material are themselves disposable they pay the price for what's going on for how the people the corporate owners basically dump things but also extract labor cheap labor, let us be very clear, cheap labor and also subject them to risks. So the novel is actually a critique of global capital and how what is called waste capitalism spreads all

over the world especially the global south and makes sure that humans and non-humans land, soil, water, earth are all equally polluted so the novel is actually a critique of waste capitalism. A waste capitalism which renders some people waste people.

So if you look at what we have discussed in this particular module we have moved from the biopolitical regime where people are rendered disposable their bodies are disposable in cases such as Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and other novels, Ambikasudhan Mangad's novel on the endosulfan tragedy, *Swarga*, where the corporate body in close alliance with the state with the government has toxified the atmosphere and the victims are disposable, nobody really cares what happens to them nobody really bothers what happens to them. In our second set of examples we looked at biopolitics of the reproductive kind using uh Margaret Atwood's famous *The Handmaid's Tale* as of a case study where again you see the women are confined to are restricted to their reproductive functions nothing else really constitutes the woman and the reproductive biopolitics of the of this particular dystopian future means that they have no control over their bodies they have no uh rights over their bodies and the reproductive biopolitics of the future sees them only as reproductive machines.

Finally we're looking at things like global capital and waste people we examined uh the novel *Waste Tide* which looks at how globalization distributes waste in the global south, runs clinical and drug trials in the global south and transforms entire collectives entire communities entire regions into vulnerable lives which means to say we are in this particular module looking at entire populations women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the victims of the Bhopal Tragedy or uh the Endosulfan Tragedy and finally, waste capitalism in all these cases where there is an insistence on say social order which would be Prayaag Akhbar's *Laila*, when there is an insistence on waste recycling which would be Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* novel, we are no longer speaking of individual people we are talking about entire communities so biopolitics because it deals with populations renders entire communities vulnerable entire communities disposable people. That's it for now, thank you.